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ABSTRACT

In the wealth of documentation produced as a result of increasing pressures on local school districts to be accountable, two terms--"needs assessment" and "planning"--are bandied about most frequently. These terms are often used interchangeably and, even when this is not the case, they often represent varying shades of meaning. Such confusion in the literature makes it difficult to operationalize implicit processes and concepts at the practitioner level in the effort to improve educational practice. This paper attempts to clarify the nature of planning and of needs assessment by providing a concrete illustration of their application in a local school district. Planning has to do with "determining where we want to be, assessing where we are, and developing a strategy for getting from here to there." Needs assessment is only one phase of the planning cycle, which consists of identifying and prioritizing goals and determining needs according to the discrepancy between goals and the degree to which they are being achieved. The planning cycle also includes the development of program and instructional objectives, program development and implementation, program monitoring and evaluation, and feedback and recycling. (Author/DN)

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PROJECT KANSAS 76: CONCEPT PAPER

PLANNING IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

AN OCCASIONAL PAPER DEVELOPED BY THE PROJECT KANSAS 76 STAFF

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Project Kansas 76 is a cooperative effort to identify and develop new leadership skills and roles in Kansas education. Participating in the project, which is funded under Part D of the Education Professions Development Act, are the Kansas State Department of Education, Kansas State University, University of Kansas, Wichita State University, and the Wichita, Junction City, Manhattan, and Kansas City, Kansas school districts.

Major thrusts of the project include the cooperative assessment of educational needs in the three school systems, the identification of additional skills required by practitioners to meet these needs and the possible suggestion of new types of leadership roles which seem feasible to satisfy identified needs and priorities. Programs will then be established to upgrade practitioner skills and to prepare people to fill new leadership roles which evolve.

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PLANNING IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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PLANNING IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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INTRODUCTION

As pressures increase on local school districts to be accountable, two of the terms which are tossed about are "needs assessment" and "planning". These terms are often used interchangeably and, even when this is not the case, they often carry many different meanings. Such confusion in the literature makes it extremely difficult to operationalize implicit processes and concepts at the practitioner level in the effort to improve educational practice.

Furthermore, the accountability movement in education is paralleled by increasingly larger percentages of support coming from the state. This development suggests that state education agencies will have to assist local school districts be accountable for the state funds they expend. Such a function implies the necessity for state personnel to work closely with school district staff as well as to provide guides and written materials which are of immediate use to the harried practitioner. Very often, such publications assume a philosophical or theoretical stance as opposed to the "how to do it" stance which would be most useful in the field.

This paper is a very brief attempt to clarify the nature of planning and needs assessment by providing a concrete illustration of their application in a local school district. The author's view of these concepts and their relationships is presented followed by the illustration. Hopefully such a parsimonious treatment can reduce much of the confusion surrounding these terms and can be of more practical use to practitioners.

OVERVIEW

Planning has to do with "determining where we want to be, assessing where we are, and developing a strategy for getting from here to there". It seems logical that "where we want to be" must be defined in terms of goals - statements, in highly abstract terms, of desired and valued competencies, states of being, and/or general levels of proficiency to be achieved. A sample goal statement which was

developed by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, Berkeley, is:

> The school program should help every learner to acquire those skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for independent, autonomous learning.

Goal statements have to do with the scope and purposes of education and are largely socially and culturally defined. They provide guidance for program development efforts and are operationalized in terms of specific program and instructional objectives. In this context, a needs assessment is a discrepancy analysis which examines the discrepancy between "where we are and where we want to be" in terms of goal achievement. This discrepancy analysis obviously implies some measurement. But the measurement at this point is very general and has to do with various referent groups' perceptions of the importance of goals and the degree of achievement of important goals.

An example follows which illustrates the application of goal identification, needs assessment, and accountability within the larger context of long range planning.

APPLICATION

The Planning Cycle

Phase I - develop (or identify) goals and rank in their order of importance.

Discrepancy Analysis

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Phase II - Determine degree to which goals are being reached and how satisfactory is the effort the school is making toward each goal.

Phase III - On the basis of importance, degree of achievement, and effort being expended, designate priority goals.

Professional staff, students, and community

members are involved in Phases I, II and III.

Assume that school district X has gone through the three phases described above (needs assessment) and the following goal has emerged as a high priority one:

TO LEARN HOW TO RESPECT AND GET ALONG WITH PEOPLE WHO THINK, DRESS, AND ACT DIFFERENTLY.

DEVELOPING PROGRAM AND INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Phase IV - At this point, district personnel (staff, students, and community members) are organized into working groups. Three alternative ways of organizing these work groups are:

A. By grade level - elementary, junior high, and senior high
B. Vertically K-12 by subject matter area
C. By goals (a work group for each priority goal identified in the needs assessment phase)

Phase V - The initial task of these work groups is twofold:

A. To ascertain the degree to which current program objectives, content, and experiences contribute to goal achievement.
B. To develop program and instructional objectives which derive from the goal and contribute directly to its achievement.

Assume that in school district X, work groups have been structured K-12 by subject matter area. The Language Arts group looks at the current program in relation to the goal and writes program and instructional objectives designed to facilitate goal achievement. The instructional objectives are stated in behavioral terms and contain within them the seeds of the evaluation model which is a later phase of the planning cycle. An example of each type of objective follows:

Language Arts Program Objective

By 197__, literature by contemporary black authors will be incorporated into the content of the eleventh grade American Literature course.

Language Arts Instructional Objective
(11th Grade American Literature)

Based on reading and discussion of four contemporary black authors, eighty percent of the class will be able to write a paper describing the dominant values of the black culture as to family patterns, education, food, and music which is judged eighty percent accurate by a panel of black readers.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Phase VI - At this point, the task of the work groups shifts in the direction of developing a Language Arts program which will facilitate the achievement of program and instructional objectives which derived from the goal. Three stages are apparent in this phase:

A. Develop alternative program solutions
B. Select the program alternative which is most feasible in terms of available resources and the likelihood of achieving program and instructional objectives
C. Implement the program alternative which is selected

Phase VII - Once the selected program alternative program has been implemented, an ongoing process of monitoring and evaluation is initiated. This evaluation takes the form of measuring the degree of progress toward program and instructional objectives.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

For example, in evauating the Language Arts program relative to the program objectives noted above, the question is asked "Has black literature been incorporated into the content of the 11th grade American Literature course by the date indicated?" In evaluating the instructional objective which was posed, the question is asked "Have 80% of the students in 11th grade American Literature classes written papers on black values which are judged 80% accurate by a panel of black readers?"

Phase VIII - Data gathered through ongoing monitoring and evaluation are fed back into the preceeding phases of the planning cycle and are directed to the following questions:

FEEDBACK AND RECYCLING

A. How well are the priority goals which we identified being achieved?
B. Do the evaluation data suggest the emergency of new goals and/or revised goals and needs?
C. Are the program and instructional objectives being achieved?
D. Were the objectives realistic? Do they need to be revised in light of evaluation data?
E. Is the program we designed to meet the goal doing the job? Do we need to revise the program or substitute an alternative one?
F. Is our evaluation model appropriate in terms of measuring progress toward the objectives we established? Does it need to be revised?

Hopefully this example clearly illustrates the writer's perception of the nature of needs assessment and its status as only one phase of a planning cycle. As we have attempted to point out, this cycle includes the following phases:

I. Needs Assessment

   A. Identifying and prioritizing goals
   B. Discrepancy analysis - discrepancy between goals and the degree to which they are being achieved.
   C. Needs developed from discrepancy analysis

II. Program and Instructional Objectives Development

III. Program Development and Implementation

IV. Program Monitoring and Evaluation

V. Feedback and Recycling

It is important to remember that number of work groups are functioning simultaneously in the planning cycle. In this example, the groups in school district X are structured vertically K-12 by subject matter area. Thus Social Studies, Math, Science, etc. groups are doing the same things in their areas as the Language Arts group which was used as an illustration in this paper. Coordination among these work groups is achieved by the formation of a District Planning Council composed of members from each of the work groups, the Superintendent, and representatives of the Board of Education. It is at this level that the programs posed by the work groups are considered in terms of available resources, duplication and overlap, and the likelihood of goal achievement. The "program package" which emerges from the Planning Council is in effect the Master Plan for the district against which resources can be allocated, decisions made, and in terms of which the district can be accountable.